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ABSTRACT

The effectiveness of open admissions and delivery of educational services at a distance in serving adult learners enrolled at Athabasca University, Alberta, Canada, was studied in 1979-80 through an analysis of demographic and geographic information on 2,491 students. Information was gathered on the following characteristics: sex, age, number of people in the household, educational preparation, occupations, reason(s) for pursuing a university education, geographic location, preference for various learning situations, and reason(s) for studying at Athabasca University. The majority of the university's students were 25 to 44 years old; 63 percent of its students were female and 37 percent were male. It was found that approximately 50 percent of the students attending the university benefited from the open admission policy. Eighteen percent of the students applied for advanced credits toward an undergraduate degree based on credit earned elsewhere. Less than one percent were able to take advantage of the absence of a residency requirement and earned enough credits through advanced credit assessment to be granted a bachelor of general studies degree. Thirty percent of the students were from geographically isolated regions. The fact that many of the students reside in large cities and big towns indicates that adult learners prefer the convenience of taking home study courses. The data suggest that distance education with new media and methods serves a new student population, including women and working people. A bibliography is appended. (SW)

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REMOVING BARRIERS TO THE PARTICIPATION OF ADULT LEARNERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Removing Barriers to the Participation of Adult Learners in Higher Education

Abstract

One of the major challenges of the eighties for tertiary institutions will be to meet the substantial emerging educational needs of adults. Adults are voluntary learners who decide what they will learn and how and where. The onerous task facing higher education is to provide an educational environment to accommodate adult learners. From an institutional perspective, the educational environment can be made more accommodating by: opening admission; awarding advanced credit; removing residency requirements; and removing the constraints of scheduling and location through innovative delivery of educational experiences. This paper examines the extent to which such institutional strategies are effective in providing educational services to adult learners.

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Removing Barriers to the Participation of Adult Learners in Higher Education

> Like any successful metaphor, the notion of an ivory tower is ambiguous. It contains the idea of whiteness, symbolising purity. It reminds us of ivory itself; precious but of no very great practical use. The horn from which the tower is carved, rhinoceros or elephant, carries with it thoughts of masculine potency, even of aphrodisiacs; but also the whiteness of death, the tusk as nerveless tissue, skelton-like; and the death too, of the creature from whom the tusk was wrenched. A tower suggests a privileged vantage point; but also the idea of fortification, of battlements that separate inside from out. A little further afield, there are even joking, punning associations, too; for example, with the Tower of Babel (Hudson, 1980: 11).

Access to higher education reflects the values a society embraces. Pais and Stee (1979) consider opening access to higher education a political decision. If the importance of a high level of education amongst the population is recognized as desirable, efforts will be made to implement changes to facilitate access of people to attend higher educational courses at various times in their life. The ivory tower must retain its purity, but it must also seek to bridge the schism which separates it from the society it must serve. Now it must find ways to open its battlements and allow more of the deserving populace to enter.

Barriers of access to higher education have been rationalized on the one hand with the fear of "overqualification". Headlines dramatizing the plight of an

individual with a Ph. D. driving a cab could be eliminated if people realized that completion of a course in higher education does not mean entitlement to a certain job, profession or salary. On the other hand, postsecondary education accessible to a greater number of individuals may also be regarded as threatening to the hierarchical structure of a society. Elitism does not appear to be compatible with large numbers.

Excluding adults from the opportunity to pursue higher education may also have been a result of the notion of psychologists like James (1890) and Hollingworth (1927) that once you reached adolescence, the capacity for learning declined. Only 53 years ago Thorndike (1928: 127) suggested that nobody under forty-five should restrain himself from trying to learn anything because of a belief or fear that he is too old to be able to learn it.

Barriers to Higher Education

A number of specific barriers encountered by adults attempting to follow a postsecondary program of studies have been identified. Graney (1980), Davidson and Bryan (1980) have identified obstacles which, using terminology developed by Miller (1979), could be classified as dispositional barriers. These are: "no interest", "no time", "expense", "poor health", and "too old". The influence of the barriers "lack of interest in further education", "poor health", and "too old" increased with

age, whereas "lack of time" and "expense" decreased with advanced age. Davidson and Bryan (1980) noted that subtle social pressures may discourage certain minority group members from having sufficient self-esteem to attempt a university program.

Miller (1979) also recognized a second class of barriers termed "situational". An example of a situational barrier would be the unavailability of a postsecondary institution within commuting distance of an individual. Other forms of situational barriers exist for employed adults who encounter a variety of personal obstacles in their pursuit of university study. Adams, Draper, and Ducharme (1979) suggested that fatigue after a physically and/or mentally demanding job makes study at night difficult. Shift work is incompatible with time schedules of classes. Many adults also have family responsibilities.

There is a third class of barriers, institutional barriers in Miller's (1979) nomenclature, that adults encounter in attempting postsecondary education. Chickering (1976), Sheppard (1979), Adams, Draper and Ducharme (1979: 104-132) noted that availability of programs at night is capricious and uneven. Financial aid for part-time university students is limited and tuition fees for evening courses often exceeds tuition fees for similar day courses. Working people may also not be aware of available educational opportunities nor how to go about obtaining

such information. Failure to meet the basic requirement for entrance to a postsecondary institution represents another obstacle for adult learners. Administrative offices are frequently closed in the evening, thus, course and program advice and counselling are not accessible. The time it takes to complete a university degree on a part-time basis can be excessively long. With a residency requirement a degree program cannot be completed entirely on a part-time basis. It has also been argued that adult learners are different and require a curriculum and pedagogy which respects the experience of adults and melds with it. Inadequate testing and credit articulation have been recognized as stumbling blocks for advanced credit allocation. Distance to educational institutions influences access to educational opportunities, and scheduling of classes at inconvenient hours may further reduce the opportunity for adults to attend a university.

As the list of barriers demonstrates, there is a good understanding of the nature of the barriers confronting adults who attempt to enter the world of higher education. The problem is how to make this world more accessible. Clearly the learner has hegemony over the domain of dispositional barriers, and there may not be a great deal that institutions can do to alter the effects of these barriers. However, institutional barriers like admission requirements, quotas, range of course and program offerings, time and place schedule of classes for example

are directly controlled by institutions of higher learning. Consequently, institutions can do a great deal to facilitate adults' overcoming these barriers.

The following changes have been suggested and/or implemented in an attempt to remove the impact of institutional barriers encountered by adults: universal application of mature admission standards; equality in the fees charged to part-time and full-time students; granting of credit for relevant experience and for courses taken at other institutions; relaxation of residency requirements; greater availability of full programs (in contrast to occasional courses, at times and places convenient to working people); provision of counselling and assistance at convenient times and places; greater availability of financial support to part-time students; more extensive use of alternative educational delivery techniques; and development of more certificate, diploma and degree programs built on the day release and block release principles.

Open Learning at a Distance

As an open learning, distance education institution, Athabasca University has deliberately, through its mandate and policies, removed some of the significant institutional barriers that usually exist. Athabasca University (A.U.) has an open admission policy, that is, no formal educational prerequisites are required for a person to

qualify for admission; it has no residency requirement; credits for relevant experience and for courses taken at other institutions are evaluated and, if legitimate, granted; and alternative educational delivery techniques are employed, that is, the use of modern media and correspondence technology is employed to remove the problems of distance and inconvenient hours.

Athabasca University offers some sixty undergraduate university courses at both junior and senior levels. Most of the courses are three-credit or half-year; the remainder are six-credit or full-year. Courses range from general interest to career-specific and represent five main areas of study. There are administration courses such as accounting and administrative law; applied courses such as interpersonal communications and nursing research; humanities courses such as English, French, and history; science courses such as geology, chemistry, ecology, and computing science; and social science courses such as geography, psychology, political science, and anthropology. The course offerings serve a range of educational goals that can be pursued through the University's flexible programs: students can take a degree; transfer courses to other universities; or pursue individual intellectual or career interests.

Athabasca University also provides services to help its students meet the challenges of dispositional barriers.

Student Development Services, a unit within A.U., is responsible for providing advisory services to students and prospective students. Students can obtain assistance with career and/or educational planning, admission and program planning. This service is provided mainly by phone (60%); it is also provided by mail (28%) and in person (12%). Although offices are open from 8:30 to 16:30 Monday through Friday it is possible to make arrangements for service outside of normal business hours.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which such institutional strategies as open admissions and delivery of educational services at a distance are effective in providing educational services to adult learners. The effectiveness of these strategies is assessed through an analysis of demographic and geographic information on students enrolled in an open, distance education university.

Data Sources

The data used in the study are derived from analyses of the characteristics of 2,491 students who initiated new course enrolments at Athabasca University for the year 1979-80. Information was gathered on the following characteristics: sex, age, number of people in the household, educational preparation, occupations, reason(s)

for pursuing a university education, geographic location, preference for various learning situations, and reason(s) for studying at Athabasca University.

Results

Athabasca University's general mandate from the Government of Alberta is to provide undergraduate education in liberal and applied studies to people who are unable or unwilling to attend the campus based universities. An examination of student characteristics shows that its constituency is clearly adult. Athabasca University serves adult learners with the following characteristics: 63% of A.U. students are female and 37% are male. The age distribution is as follows: 21% range between 18 and 24 years, 66% between 25 and 44 years, 10% between 45 and 64 years and 2% are 65 years and older. Although in traditional universities approximately 80% of the postsecondary student population are in the 18 - 24 age group (Dobbins, 1979), the majority (66%) of A.U. students range in age from 25 to 44 years.

Removal of Academic Admission Requirements

To what extent did opening admission encourage those adults to attend who would otherwise have been excluded? An analysis of educational preparation of A.U. students shows that of the 2,491 students, 7% of the students indicated that their highest educational level attained was in the

elementary-junior high school category, 16% had some senior high school education, 26% held a high school diploma. Fifty per cent of the students had a senior matriculation level of education or better. Thus, nearly 50% of Athabasca University students benefitted from the open admission policy.

An examination of the highest level of postsecondary education completed, revealed that 17% of the students enrolled at Athabasca University hold a university degree, 16% a college diploma, and 11% had attended a trade, business, or technical school. This is consistent with Humphreys and Porter's (1978) finding that a substantial proportion of part-time students undertaking further undergraduate study already have a degree or some form of postsecondary education. In addition, Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) who examined the adult part-time learner in colleges and universities found that adult students at institutions of higher education are better educated, younger, more likely to be employed, and more likely to be pursuing education for job-related reasons. Further research is needed to determine to what extent individuals with postsecondary education pursue studies at A.U. for career reasons, be it career changes or advancement, or personal interest.

Removal of Time Related Barriers

Delivery of educational services at a distance removes time constraints. As a result of not having to attend classes at a particular time, A.U. students can remain employed and most of them have full-time occupations (about 90%). The range of occupations reported is extremely diverse. However, certain occupational groups can be identified. In the 1979-80 student body, the largest group was that of housewives with 13%. Teachers represented 10%, clerical occupations such as secretaries 9%, as were full-time students and retired individuals, and 8% were nurses.

In addition, an individual's ability to remain employed while pursuing an education has financial implications and thus, may remove yet another major barrier. It should also be noted that course fees are about the same as those charged at the other Alberta universities. However, the A.U. fee covers all course material including texts, a cost which is extra in traditional universities. This could mean a substantial saving depending on the course. Senior citizens (65 years and older) are exempt from tuition fees.

The removal of time related barriers and place related barriers opens doors for women. Sixty-three per cent of the student body is female, and 13% of the student body specified their occupation as housewife/homemaker.

A further description of the Athabasca University student population can be made in terms of home life characteristics. The number of dependents in an A.U. student's household is of interest in that it provides some indication of their stage in the life cycle and hence the nature and extent of their family responsibilities. The high percentage of A.U. students (66%) ranging between 25 and 44 years, is noteworthy in that this is the child-bearing and rearing age. Twenty-three per cent of A.U. students in 1979-80 reported having preschool children, 29% elementary and/or junior high school age children and 12% high school age children. The highest percentage of A.U. students have elementary and/or junior high school children at home. It is at this time that the child's dependence and continual supervision required by the mother decreases. The child spends a large part of the day at school and the importance of peer group and friends helps to loosen the tie to the family. A woman is yet relatively young, if we assume that she had a child at ages 20 to 24 and the child attends school at six years of age. Thus, with time available, she may consider resuming her education for personal and/or professional reasons. In second place ranks the percentage of A.U. students with preschool children at home. A preschool child requires time and attention, but if a woman is career oriented she can on a part-time basis devote a little time to study. Moreover, she is young. A.U. students with high school children ranked in third place.

Although the dependence of high school children has decreased yet further, the age of the mother has increased. The drive and/or the necessity to learn may have lessened. Further research is needed to clarify the relationship between phases in the life cycle and educational needs.

Removal of Place Related Barriers

As a result of being able to serve students wherever they live, 7% of A.U. students live in census divisions in the province where no postsecondary institutions are located. Alberta has a population of approximately 2 million people, of which 55% are located in Edmonton, Calgary, Red Deer and Lethbridge. Each of these centers have a population greater than 41,000. Fifty-two per cent of A.U. students live in these four major cities. Fort McMurray and Grande Prairie, centers in the North, have 2% of the Alberta population and they represent 18% of our student population. The remaining 23% come from across the province.

Place constraints exist also in a narrower sense when a person has to attend an educational institution to receive instruction. A.U. students were asked to indicate their preferred learning situation, be it: on their own, in a group, a combination of solitary and group learning or not sure. In 1979-80, 35% of the students indicated they preferred to study on their own, 5% in a group, 44% a combination of solitary and group learning and 16% were not

sure. Solitary learning is preferred over group learning, but being able to have a combination of both solitary and group learning ranked in first place. To learn on one's own removes the necessity to follow a time schedule set by the institution, but it does not eliminate developing and following a personal study schedule convenient to one's own life style.

Removal of Residency Requirement

Athabasca University has been given the mandate by the Provincial Government to act as a credit-coordinating agency for the Province. For practical purposes this means firstly that A.U. endeavors, as much as possible, to articulate its programs with those of other postsecondary institutions and secondly, that A.U. gives careful consideration to the awarding of transfer credit for university level work or its equivalent undertaken at a wide variety of postsecondary institutions. In particular, A.U. has established a Bachelor of General Studies (BGS) degree which is given for individually designed educational programs without the normal one or two year residency requirements. In 1979-80, 18% of the A.U. students made use of the advanced credit evaluation service, but less than 1% obtained a bachelor of general studies degree on the basis of university credits earned exclusively at other institutions.

Students' Reasons for a University Education

It is also interesting to note the reasons mentioned by students for pursuing a university education and why they study at A.U. Students expressed the following reasons for a university education: 44% of A.U. students indicated that they wanted a university education for career reasons, be it preparation for a future career, a job requirement or career advancement; 30% indicated personal reasons like general interest, self-improvement, and learning for its own sake; 19% of the students were taking a course for educational reasons to obtain a degree or credential; and 7% did not specify any reason for attending a university. Occupational goals and personal reasons were identified as main reasons for a university education.

The 2,491 students listed flexibility of time (33%) and place (28%); open admission and educational offerings (19%); and financial considerations (16%) as reasons for studying at A.U. Students enrolled at Athabasca University because of its unique characteristics: reducing time and place constraints, and offering a variety of courses to which access is possible through an open admission policy.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to examine from an institutional perspective how the educational environment can be made more accommodating by opening admission,

awarding advanced credit, removing residency requirements and removing the constraints of scheduling and location through innovative delivery of educational experiences. The extent to which the institution was successful can be inferred from the data. Approximately 50% of the students attending A.U. benefitted from the open admission policy. Eighteen per cent of the students applied for advanced credits toward an undergraduate degree based on credit earned elsewhere. A very small number of students, less than 1%, were able to take advantage of the absence of a residency requirement and earned enough credits through advanced credit assessment to be granted a bachelor of general studies degree. Thirty per cent of the students live in geographically isolated regions. The fact that 47% of the students reside in two large cities, Edmonton and Calgary and 23% in big towns indicates that adult learners prefer the convenience of taking home study courses which allows them to proceed according to a schedule and a pace of their own choosing.

The demand for higher education exists as a result of a relatively sharp increase in the number of women students and the greater number of working people participating in higher education. The data suggests that distance education with new media and methods serves a new student population. A distance education university is especially suitable to people for whom traditional forms of education are either inappropriate or inaccessible as for example people who are

fully employed, geographically isolated, the handicapped or those whose preference is not to enter a youth-oriented environment but to study on their own.

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